

WEEK ONE

Introduction

DAY ONE

What would you like to see happen in your heart and life as a result of this study?

Write a prayer to the Lord, asking him to do those things you have asked.

DAY TWO

Who wrote the letter to the church in Colosse, and who was with him at the time of writing?

Colossians 1:1

In which New Testament letters do you find this same pairing of names in the introduction?

Who was the letter addressed to? *Colossians 1:2*

What was this church known for? *Colossians 1:3-4*

Paul commends the church for “the love you have for all the saints” (verse 4). This means their love for the church extended beyond their own individual church. What actions might have led to them developing a reputation like this?

What were the readers to do with the letter after they read it? *Colossians 4:16*

Where was Colosse located? (Use the maps located in the back of your Bible. The maps you will want to refer to are the ones depicting the travels of Paul. You may also refer to the illustration on the back cover of this book.)

What towns were located near Colosse? *Colossians 2:1; 4:13; 4:16*

The apostle Paul was not the person who first brought the gospel to Colosse. A man named Epaphras did. Where was he from, and what was Paul's opinion of him? *Colossians 1:7-8; 4:12-13*

Do you, like Epaphras, share Christ with those who do not know him? What would godly disciples say about you?

Epaphras was with Paul (probably in Rome) when the letter was written. According to Paul, how did this man spend his time? *Colossians 4:12-13*

Would others say that you spend your time in this way?

Epaphras is also mentioned in the book of Philemon. How does Paul describe him in that book? *Philemon 23*

Why do you think Paul describes him in this way?

What is the Christian to do in regard to false teaching and false teachers?

Titus 1:10-16; Hebrews 13:9

Paul uses strong words in addressing the Christians in Colosse. What gave him the right to speak to the church in such a way?

DAY FIVE

Read Colossians 1-4, preferably in one sitting. Don't take any notes as you read, just take the time necessary to slowly read the chapters. When you are finished, write any thought these chapters leave you with in the space below.

DAY SIX

Read the study notes.

INTRODUCTION

This letter has captivated my heart. I think about its message frequently. It has changed the way I think about Christ. It has changed the way I think about myself. I have been a Christian now for over 30 years, yet there are things within this book that I have never heard before. That is not to say that no one ever told them to me. I simply never *heard* them. I missed the simple message of this book.

This is not a long book. And it is not laden with technical terms as are other New Testament books like Romans or Hebrews. But what it lacks in length and complexity, it more than makes up for in impact. This is a radical book. It is, as the word radical means, "marked by a considerable departure from the usual or traditional". Those who grasp its message are "tending or disposed to make extreme changes in existing views, habits, conditions, or institutions".¹

The letter entitled "Colossians" was written by Paul to "the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse" (Colossians 1:2). These "holy and faithful brothers" (the Colossian church) were to read the letter, and then pass this letter on to the church in neighboring Laodicea.

After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans ... Colossians 4:16

¹ Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Company, Publishers, 1972), p. 705.

WEEK ONE

Introduction

Of course, the letter has traveled far beyond the two churches originally designated by Paul: it has been read, pondered, memorized, discussed, delighted in, preached about, and acted on by churches in all parts of the world. Within this letter a glorious mystery is unveiled; the knowledge of which will change your life. This mystery can be seen in other New Testament books, but never so clearly as it is seen here.

But that is getting ahead of the story. If we're to get the most out of this letter, we must gather as much background information as possible. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, in their excellent book, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, explain the great importance of starting with the background information before attempting to interpret the meaning of an Epistle.

... there is one thing that all of the Epistles have in common, and this is the crucial thing to note in reading and interpreting them: they are all what are technically called occasional documents (i.e., arising out of and intended for a specific occasion), and they are from the first century. Although inspired by the Holy Spirit and thus belonging to all time, they were first written out of the context of the author to the context of the original recipients. It is precisely these factors – that they are occasional and that they belong to the first century – that make their interpretation difficult at times.

Above all else, their occasional nature must be taken seriously. This means that they were occasioned, or called forth, by some special circumstance, either from the reader's side or the author's. Almost all of the New Testament letters were occasioned from the reader's side (Philemon and perhaps James and Romans are exceptions). Usually the occasion was some kind of behavior that needed correcting, or a doctrinal error that needed setting right, or a misunderstanding that needed further light.²

What was the occasion that called this letter forth? Why did Paul send it? A little digging in the pages of our New Testament will provide us with some helpful answers. These answers will take us much further in our study of Colossians than if we just jumped right into the letter.

THE FIRST COLOSSIAN CHRISTIAN

The gospel must make inroads at some time and in some way to each area of the world. It is an elementary truth, but a truth most Christians have never considered. The church has not always existed in your present location. Someone, probably someone you do not know, brought it there. In Colosse, Epaphras was that person. Paul reminds the Colossians of this fact in the letter's introduction.

You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. Colossians 1:7-8

Where did Epaphras first hear the gospel? The most likely scenario is that he heard it during Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus.

It was Paul's habit to begin in highly populated cultural centers. He would preach the gospel, a church would be established, and he would trust the new converts to bring the gospel to the surrounding area.

Ephesus was certainly a prime location for this strategy. A highway ran from Ephesus all the way to the Euphrates River. Towns of all shapes and sizes were to be found along this east-west trade route. Colosse, 100 miles east of Ephesus, was one of these towns.

It was neither a large nor an important town, though it had formerly been both; it had been upstaged by its near neighbors Laodocia, ten miles away, and Hierapolis, six miles beyond that. The letter indicates that Paul, who seems to have concentrated on major centers of population, had not visited the town himself ...³

2 Gordon D. Fee, Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), p. 48.

3 N.T. Wright, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), pp. 21-22.

Colosse and Ephesus were both part of the Roman province of Asia,⁴ thus commerce between the cities was regular. In other words, once the gospel gained a foothold in Ephesus, it was only a matter of time before the church would also be established in Colosse.

Paul spent three years in Ephesus,⁵ “probably from A.D. 54 to 57”.⁶ While there he taught “publicly and from house to house” (Acts 20:20). He “had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus” (Acts 19:9). Was Epaphras (the first Colossian Christian) among the number attending these daily discussions? It is quite possible. If so, he had a rare privilege indeed, spending two years in the Apostle Paul’s Bible school.⁷

THE CHURCH IN COLOSSE

Precisely when Epaphras first preached the gospel in his hometown⁸ and the surrounding area is not known. But we do know that by the time of Paul’s letter to the Colossians, churches were established in Colosse and its two neighboring towns: Laodicea and Hierapolis. The initial preaching of the gospel and the establishment of the churches in these communities happened in less than six years.

The church grew and developed a reputation for their faith and the love they had for “all the saints” (Colossians 1:4). But there were also serious issues that needed to be addressed; issues so serious that they demanded the apostle’s intervention. The situation was so urgent that Epaphras made a journey to find Paul and tell him all about the church and the situation found within it.

Briefly, the church in Colosse seems to have been infiltrated with false teachers whose “fine sounding arguments” (Colossians 2:4) were deceiving the church. These false teachers were using “hollow and deceptive philosophy” (Colossians 2:8) to draw the Christians after themselves. They were pulling the Christians toward works and away from reliance on Christ. These false teachers called into question the Christian’s normal eating and drinking habits and the days on which they did, or did not, worship. Beyond merely questioning the Colossian Christians’ behavior, the false teachers established new laws which the Colossian Christians were to keep. The false teachers also delighted in “false humility and the worship of angels” (Colossians 2:18) and talked extensively about what they had seen spiritually. According to Paul, these teachers had “lost connection with the Head” (Colossians 2:19), that is, Christ.

Epaphras hurried to Paul’s side because it appears the church was turning from his leadership and was following these teachers. They were submitting to the rules the teachers brought with them – rules which included avoiding many good things which God intended for his people’s pleasure.

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teaching. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. Colossians 2:20-23

Legalism never brings holiness. Its foul fruit is bondage and disunity. No church is immune from its attacks. We need to constantly guard against the seductive message of works. It will take root whenever and wherever it can.

Paul dealt with legalism often. Many times, he could not personally go to the churches in trouble. This did not leave him weaponless. He had prayer, he had his pen, and he had trusted friends.

I’m sure Paul would have loved to travel to Colosse himself and spend time with these troubled saints. But he could not. He was in prison at this time.

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you. Colossians 4:18⁹

4 The province of Asia is not the same area as is found within the continent of Asia. The province of Asia was a Roman province in the western-most portion of modern day Turkey.

5 See Acts 20:31.

6 A. Skevington Wood, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 11: Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), p. 12.

7 The Amplified New Testament expands on verse nine, stating that Paul “went on holding daily discussions in the lecture room of Tyrannus from about ten o’clock till three”. If correct, this would be during the hottest part of the day, when the lecture hall was probably not in use. This would also be during the time of day when many people were resting rather than working. If this were the case, a large number of people could have heard him on a daily basis.

8 See Colossians 4:12.

9 See also Colossians 4:3 and 4:10.

WEEK ONE

Introduction

Paul does not indicate where he was in prison. At least three possibilities have been raised. Some believe Paul wrote this epistle while he was imprisoned in Caesarea.¹⁰ Others believe Paul wrote this while he was imprisoned in Ephesus. This is possible and has many points in its favor; however, this view is difficult to prove, as no Scripture clearly indicates that Paul was ever imprisoned in Ephesus. Perhaps the majority of scholars believe Paul wrote this epistle while he was under house arrest in Rome.¹¹

*The traditional theory, and the one still most generally held, is that Paul was in Rome when Colossians was written. The Epistle should therefore be dated about A.D. 62, during Paul's first Roman imprisonment.*¹²

But no matter where Paul was imprisoned, he was unable to travel to Colosse at this time. The only solution was to write a letter to the church.¹³ Since the church would not heed Epaphras's warnings, perhaps they would listen to Paul himself.

THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

Tychicus, one of Paul's helpers, carried this letter to Colosse. This faithful brother was sent by Paul on journeys he could not make himself.¹⁴ Tychicus was from the province of Asia,¹⁵ the same province Colosse was located in, but most likely was not from Colosse itself, as Paul would have mentioned this fact in his greeting.

Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts.
Colossians 4:7-8

Tychicus's traveling companion, Onesimus, was from Colosse. But while Paul obviously placed a great deal of trust in him, he was certainly not trusted in Colosse, for he was a runaway slave. He had apparently run away from Philemon, his owner in Colosse, and, in God's providence, ran to the city where Paul was being held as a prisoner. Somehow, he met Paul and met the Lord. After his conversion, Onesimus helped Paul a great deal in his ministry. But now Paul was sending him back to Philemon.

Paul does not describe Onesimus as a runaway slave in his letter to the church in Colosse. Instead, he tells the church that Onesimus is "one of you" and a "faithful and dear brother".

He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here. *Colossians 4:9*

However, Paul did not trust that these words alone would clear Onesimus's name in Colosse. For that reason, he wrote another letter, the letter to Philemon, in which he pleads Onesimus's case. This letter was not addressed to the entire church. It was addressed to Onesimus's owner.

I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

I am sending him – who is my very heart – back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

10 See Acts 23:23 - 26:32.

11 See Acts 28:30-31.

12 Curtis Vaughan, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 11, Colossians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), p. 166.

13 Colossians is one of four prison letters Paul wrote (Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon). Three of these letters (Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon) were apparently sent at the same time and with the same messenger. The letter to the church in Philippi would not have been sent with these three letters, as Philippi was located across the Aegean Sea from the province of Asia.

14 See also Titus 3:12.

15 See Acts 20:4.

So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back - not to mention that you owe me your very self. Philemon 10-19

Thus, the letter to Philemon was something like a cover letter to the letter to the Colossians. It was meant to facilitate the rather sticky business of Onesimus’s return to Colosse. In addition to these two letters, it appears Paul gave Tychicus a third letter to deliver on this journey – the letter to the Ephesians.

After setting out from Rome (if that is where Paul was imprisoned), Tychicus and Onesimus were probably first sent to Ephesus with the letter to the Ephesians.

Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you. Ephesians 6:21-22

After delivering the letter to Ephesus, Tychicus and Onesimus probably continued their journey east through the province of Asia, stopping in every place where the church was found and reading the letter to the church in Ephesus to them.¹⁶ Traveling this route eventually brought them to Colosse.

So now we have a pretty fair picture of how the church and, subsequently, this letter, arrived in Colosse. Epaphras first preached the gospel in Colosse. In a very short period of time, churches were established in Colosse and its two neighboring cities – Hierapolis and Laodicea. Paul wrote the letter to the church in Colosse because of news he had received from Epaphras. Paul sent Tychicus on this mission with three letters: the letter to the church in Ephesus, the letter to the church in Colosse, and the letter to Philemon.

The Bible gives no indication of what happened when the letter arrived. I can tell you, however, that saints throughout history have testified that they have been forever changed by the message found here. My prayer is that your name will soon be added to that list.

DAY SIX (CONTINUED)

This week, the Holy Spirit has taught me....

Horizontal lines for writing.

¹⁶ The letter to the Ephesians is more general than the letter to the Colossians. It does not address specific problems in a specific church. It appears to have been written for all of Asia, rather than just Ephesus. The letter to the Ephesians is probably the letter Paul refers to in Colossians 4:16.